

## Role-playing

Andrew Burn

### Abstract

*The idea of role-playing in video games is inextricably linked to the genre of the role-playing game (RPG). However, forms of dramatic action we could legitimately call role-play can be found in other genres of games and in virtual worlds. This essay will introduce general concepts of role-play in culture and briefly describe role-playing games, before proposing three ways to think about role-play in games: mimicry; the semiotics of role-play; and drama theory.*

Playing roles is fundamental to human society and culture. In relation to play and games, it belongs to Caillois's category of mimicry ([1958] 2001): the kind of play in which we behave "as if" (to use Dorothy Heathcote's term, ([1983] 1991, p. 149): as if we were someone else, somewhere else, in imaginary bodies, worlds, or identities. In sociological terms, role is central to socialization, to childhood development, and to the playing out of social functions in families and jobs. It is the quotidian dramaturgical process represented by Goffman's "performance of self in everyday life" (Goffman, 1959). However, while the role-play of festival, carnival, theatre, pantomime, *commedia dell'arte*, nativity play, and a multitude of other spectacular forms of mimicry seem opposed to the routinized, invisible nature of social roles, the two are related, and can both serve as analogs for forms of roles we find in digital games and virtual worlds.

The function of role is as ambiguous as the function of play itself. It can be seen as developmental (in childhood), therapeutic, educational, creative, cathartic, political, interrogative, and adulatory. It can also be seen as serving no material purpose whatsoever

outside the realm of play, as the great play theorists argue. From a psychological point of view it is no less ambiguous: it can involve the kind of intense emotional commitment required in Stanislavski's System; or it can offer a critical distance from the power-play of social roles, as in Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. It can be light, silly, disposable, and party-like; or profound, sustained, and memorable. It can be the stock masks of Harlequin, Widow Twankey, and Cinderella. It can be the lipstick and high heels of little girls playing mummy, the lycra suits and rubber muscles of Batman costumes for children, or the scar and glasses of Harry Potter. It can be Hamlet's customary suits of solemn black, or Prospero's magic staff. It can be the fan culture of Japanese cosplay, the elaborate style of punk or Goth subculture, the dress uniform of a regimental dinner, or the doctoral robes of a university professor. Any of these, and a multitude more, could serve as comparisons against which forms of role-play in games might be interrogated.

In the more formal context of theatre, role is historically marked off from the realities beyond the proscenium arch; yet dramatic texts have always played with this apparently impermeable barrier. When Puck and Prospero address us directly at the end of their respective plays, enjoining us to contribute to the final outcomes of the drama, the seal is pricked, and begins to leak a little. And these forms of address, in the second person, delegating some agency to the audience, are perhaps cultural precursors of the profitable confusion of audience and protagonist that characterizes the digital games of our era. Meanwhile, the practice of role-play in modern dramaturgy, especially radical practice in social and educational movements, similarly shifts the burden of role from actor to audience, producing the characteristic of games which Juul has called "negotiated consequences" (2003), in which the "magic circle" of play (Huizinga, ([1938] 1955) provides either a safe space for experimentation or a conduit to real-world outcomes.

The idea of role-playing in digital games is inextricably linked to the genre of the role-playing game (RPG); though forms of dramatic action we could legitimately call role-play can be found in other genres of game and in virtual worlds. The next section will briefly describe role in the specific context of role-playing games, before proposing three ways to think about role-play in games: mimicry, the semiotics of role-play, and drama theory.

### **RPGs: A Brief Outline**

Role-playing games, in the strict sense, derive from table-top games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974), which in turn derived its content and narratives from a range of fantasy fiction, including Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). Carr *et al.* (2006) give a description both of Japanese console-based RPGs, which adapted the character sets, landscapes, and narratives of Western table-top games to the forms familiar in post-war Japanese popular culture (evil corporations, nuclear weapons, and samurai-like urban eco-warriors); and *D&D*-style Western RPGs, such as *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware, 1998), which incorporated the multi-sided dice of the table-top game into their game engines.

The RPG player will often have a choice about the kind of protagonist they will play; whether an anonymous customizable avatar, or the narrative's preset main character, such as Cloud Strife in *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997) (Figure 1). Either way, they will acquire experience points enabling specialist skills as they move through the game. They may be supported by companions with different skills, such as thieves, warriors, healers, and mages. Even in stand-alone RPGs with a single user, players adopting the protagonist role can lead a computer-generated team. These structures result in often challenging, complex games which "tend to prioritize reflection, reading and strategy over pace or spectacle" (Carr *et al.*, 2006: 21).

However, many people's experience of role-playing games will be through massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs). Perhaps the main difference in terms of role-playing is that the multiplayer world precludes the possibility of the player taking on a central, identified role in a core narrative. Whereas in *Final Fantasy VII*, we assume the identity of the hero (with a team of named allies), in an MMORPG such as *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive, 1998), *Lineage* (NCSoft Corporation, 2002), *Anarchy Online* (Funcom, 2001), or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), all the millions of players worldwide are each the hero of his or her own story, and so are anonymous in relation to the overarching narrative which MMORPGs typically superimpose. Players choose their own names and develop their own pathways through the game, though the sense of "narrative" and role here may be quite loose. Playing an online game can feel, to new players, like wandering aimlessly around, occasionally killing small animals (gaining points and money), or going shopping for weapons or spells (to spend the money). Nevertheless, in contrast to this quite loose adoption of role, a minority of players can opt, in games such as *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft*, to dedicate themselves to a more dramatically intense form of role-play on dedicated servers where, with other role-players, they develop complex backstories and characters.

A number of researchers have considered what it is like to enter into online worlds and MMOGs. Carr *et al.*, (2006) discussing the MMORPG *Anarchy Online*, designated three functions of play in online games: representational play (narrative functions), ludic play (engagement with game elements), and communal play (engagements with communities of players) (Figure 1). Taylor (2006) charts the progress of the researchers' avatars through the MMORPG *EverQuest*, exploring the experiences of "newbies", informal groupings of players, formed as "micro-level, short-term network[s]" (p. 42), and guilds, the more formal organization of high-level players. In these various forms of social organization, a number of

themes emerge: collaboration and competition, reputation, trust, levels of responsibility accorded members at different levels of the hierarchy, and so on. In fact, of course, many elements of social organization among groups in online worlds resemble those found in the physical world, such as those identified in communities of practice theory: how membership of a group can range from committed, central roles to “legitimate peripheral participation”, for example (Lave and Wenger, 1991).



**Figure 1.** The author’s avatar, Nirvano, joining a mission group in *Anarchy Online*.

Taylor also engages with a longstanding debate about the relationship between the player’s offline and online experience, arguing that the relationship between real and virtual

worlds is not clear-cut, and that they can leak into each other. Jensen, studying a sample of *EverQuest* players over time, makes the same argument: that the lives of the players, whether in families, retirement, or unemployment, are in some way affected by their role-play in the game (Jensen, 2012). Neither scholar, however, is asserting a simple argument about deterministic effects of games upon social life. Rather, they are arguing that the relationship is complex: in many ways, games are marked out as separate, imaginary spaces; yet, as Internet researchers have often found, online social interaction is affected by offline lives in certain ways, and vice versa. There are no simple rules here: each case needs to be studied on its own merits.

### **Mimicry: Avatars and Protagonists**

As I've suggested, Role-play falls, in Caillois's classification of games, under the heading of mimicry. His discussion of mimicry, indeed, might pass as a discussion of role-play, in its emphasis on masks, disguises, theatre, and acting:

... the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another. (Caillois, [1958] 2001, p. 19)

These processes of mimicry in games take the form of the avatar; and avatar studies have developed substantially over the last decade. Jensen helpfully reviews this literature, identifying a wide variety of themes, such as identity, gender, virtual embodiment, communicative function, and multimodal design, while highlighting the predominance of theories of multiple identity and of representation (Jensen, 2012, p. 351 ff.).

In relation specifically to role-play, an avatar can be viewed in one sense as we would view any other protagonist of a narrative. It has identifying characteristics, principally visual, which locate it in relation to the genre and narrative in which it functions; it has a narrative function, to perform actions which will progress the narrative; it will interact with other characters with different functions, whether collaboratively with “helper” character types, or combatively with antagonist types. In these respects, it may be thought of in terms of Propp’s morphology of folktale character types (Propp, 1970). However, more importantly for our purpose, this is a protagonist some of whose agency has been delegated to the player. The dramaturgical significance of this has been noted from the beginning of studies of games and electronic narratives. Laurel (1991) and Murray (1997) both noted, in their seminal texts, what it might mean for a member of a theatre audience to cross the threshold of the stage and become an actor in the drama, as is the case when a player assumes a role via an avatar.

The sense of this is perhaps strongest in those forms of role-play in which an avatar with a defined identity and narrative is available. More recently, this kind of player-character is often distinguished from the kind of customizable avatar of MMORPGs and virtual worlds. However, my argument is that the protagonist figure still operates as the player’s representative in the game, and thus fulfils the criterial avatar function. In *Final Fantasy VII*, the player assumes the role of a character equipped with an elaborate backstory, a former friend who has become an enemy, a series of romantic entanglements, and a clear mission, all revealed through textual interpolations or cut-scenes. This experience is powerful for fans who follow the story of the characters with the same dedication as fans of any other media franchise (Jenkins, 1992). It is well-known that the death of the female character Aeris in *FFVII* caused an outpouring of grief among fans worldwide; while studies of fan-forums show how they imaginatively develop the story of the game by writing spoilers, fanfiction, and even poetry (Carr *et al.*, 2006).

The imaginary relationship between player and character can be thought of in relation to longstanding questions about the ways in which readers of literature relate to the fictional characters in the texts they read. The French narratologist Gerard Genette coined the word “focalization” to capture the way in which texts establish narrative point of view, or in Genette’s question, “Who sees?” (Genette, 1980). This helps one to think about the relationship between player and avatar-protagonist. In Genette’s terms, the perception of the gameworld from the avatar’s point of view resembles Genette’s category of internal focalization, in which the narrator is restricted to what the character sees and knows. However, multiple narrative structures are at work; narrative information is revealed to the player and avatar by other means, such as backstory, on-screen text and cut-scene, in which the narrative view resembles Genette’s zero focalisation, where the narrator knows more than the character.

However, we need additional theories to account for ways in which the player can *act* upon the game through the avatar. In particular, we need to keep sight of the fact that, while games may share many characteristics with literary and film narratives, they are still *games*. We can think, then, about how the progression of the narrative, through character roles, events and consequences, and the temporal unfolding of narrative complications and resolutions, is integrated with the ludic system of the game: the puzzles, missions, point-accumulation, game economies, levelling, and win-lose outcomes. Similarly, we can think about how role-play here means to assume the representational guise of a warrior, elf, mage, or halfling on the one hand; but also to manage a package of quantified assets to play against the game engine on the other. This integration of narrative protagonist and ludic entity is described by Burn and Schott as the Heavy Hero and Digital Dummy in the case of *Final Fantasy VII* (Burn and Schott, 2003).



This double engagement of the player—with the ludic system of the avatar and the narrative properties of the protagonist—is not limited to RPGs, of course. Player engagement with a favorite character can feel like the inhabiting of the fictional entity's persona, while the player is playing the game system at the same time. Playing Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (Eidos, 1996) can feel like inhabiting a female protagonist with quite specific dramatized qualities, while at the same playing a platform-jumping device. Playing Harry Potter in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Knowwonder, 2002) can feel like being Harry Potter and entering Hogwarts while playing a magic bean-accumulating machine (Burn and Parker, 2003). In such cases, text and player jointly contribute to the affective experience of the narrative, and the immersive flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 2002; Carr *et al.*, 2006) of the game. For fans of a particular text or franchise, the game-text is met by the long experience and commitment of the fan, and the motivation to enter the imaginary world and to appropriate or even transform it (Jenkins, 1992; Burn, 2006a).

However, these kinds of imaginative engagements with avatar figures may not accurately reflect the experience of other players in other games. In particular, the avatars of MMORPGs, as we have seen, have no specific identity in relation to a specific narrative. While some argue, nevertheless, that to adopt, modify, and act through an avatar is to enter into a kind of identity play (Talomo and Ligorio 2001; Filiciak 2003), others argue that the avatar here really functions as a kind of non-human companion: an artificial entity who accompanies us on a journey or mission (Jensen, 2012).

### **The Semiotics of Role-play**

How might we analyze the engagement of the player with the avatar? The analytical approach I propose here derives from the social semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). They present three overarching metafunctions of any act of communication: the

representational (to represent the world); the interactive (to communicate between participants in the semiotic exchange); and the textual (to produce coherent, meaningful sequences). If we apply this to literature and to film, we can treat narrative characters, actions, and landscapes essentially as representations. The interactive function would be the ways in which the reader or viewer is positioned: via address systems (such as first-person or third-person narratives in literature), camera angles, shot sizes, or characters speaking directly to camera (in film).

In games, something different happens. Since some of the character's actions are delegated to the player, representation needs to be seen also as interaction. Meanwhile, the address system of the text changes. Instead of referring to the protagonist as "he", "she", or "I", the text addresses the player as "you", whether literally (as in an on-screen instruction) or figuratively, in a kind of persistent second-person state. In fact, when players talk about the character they are playing, interview data can reveal a kind of pronoun-shifting: sometimes they refer to their avatar as "he" or "she"; sometimes as "I", reflecting the double engagement of someone who is watching this digital figure move through the story, and at the same time responding to the second-person address of the game, and feeling as if they are, in some sense, the character (Burn, 2006b).

We can also look at the nature of the actions performed by the player in role as avatar. In reality, these are usually quite limited, needing to be quickly activated by the player with a few keystrokes or button presses. They may involve movement forwards and back, using a weapon, pick-up, and jumping and crouching. Half a dozen or so actions seem very limited if we compare the avatar to a character in literature or film; and we might wonder how they can lead to such satisfying dramatic experiences for players. There are two answers, one ludic, one representational. The ludic clue lies in the linguistic idea of "restricted languages". Halliday (1989) argues that, in the game of contract bridge, though the player is working with

a restricted language of thirteen cards and four suits, the possible combinations of these and the elaborate conventions of the bidding process make this a sophisticated and satisfying game. In the same way, the limited set of actions the avatar can perform, in combination with a wide range of quantified assets and interaction with both AI characters and sometimes other human players, makes game-play similarly satisfying and complex. The other answer is what I have called “semiotic amplification”. We may just be pressing the “up” arrow on a keyboard, but the rich set of signs on-screen, depicting landscapes and characters, make it feel as if we’re teetering, or rushing, or tiptoeing, or climbing, or swinging, or swimming. Though the interface actions are limited, the semiotic amplification is unlimited.

Kress and van Leeuwen also adapt the system of mood in language, following Halliday (1985), applying it to visual media. Just as in language an utterance can be categorized as indicative (a statement), interrogative (a question), or imperative (a command), so narrative stances can be characterized as acts of demand or offer. We might say, then, that narratives in literature or film are *offers*: essentially, they make a narrative statement which we then follow. Games, however, are typically *demand acts*: they ask us questions, and issue commands. These may be literal, linguistic acts: do you want to go down this corridor or that one? Do you want to be a warrior or healer? Or they may be visual acts: a maze confronting us asks which way we want to go; an enemy advancing towards us demands combat.

A social semiotic analysis, then, can reveal how playing a character in a game is different from engaging with a character in literature and film, at least in terms of its semiotic structure and its social meanings.

## **Drama Theory**

As we have seen, games have been considered a dramatic form from the beginning. Frasca, for example, borrowed from the theory and practice of Augusto Boal’s profoundly

influential work, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985), which re-conceives of theatre as a form of social critique and intervention by devising conventions allowing social groups to direct the drama, intervene in its progress, and take on roles. Frasca's argument in "Videogames of the Oppressed" is that games offer the same possibility, and he imagines how a game like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) might make it possible for a player to dramatically explore social and political themes through the game (Frasca, 2001).

Also influenced by Boal, drama educators have begun to take an interest in role-play in games and virtual worlds. They have pointed out the resemblances between educational drama, which is based on explorations of role and the shared construction of imaginary spaces, and games which offer similar opportunities (Carroll, 2002). The argument here is that role-work in educational drama can be brought into convergence with young people's experience of digital games. Both forms raise questions of identity: of the imagined identities that people adopt when in role, and how these might relate to postmodern conceptions of social identity as multiple, provisional, and fragmented. More recently, Carroll has described how the educational drama convention of "Mantle of the Expert", in which roles invest participants with professional skills and qualities needed to solve problems, resembles the principle of epistemic games, which have a similar purpose in education, providing young people with resources to think their way through authentic, real-world problems (Carroll, 2009).

However, while education may often emphasize the more serious connections between role-play and games, a focus on play reminds us that, while it may provide environments for the exploration of social issues and the nature of identity, it is also always ambiguous, as Sutton-Smith has famously argued (1997). While some rhetorics of play in his list make serious claims for play's function as identity, learning, fate, and power, he places last on his list the ancient rhetoric of frivolity: play as essentially pointless. In a recent

research project of my own (Children's Playground Games and Songs in the Age of New Media, the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Beyond Text Program, 2009-11), looking at children's playground play (Willett *et al.*, 2013), we observed many examples of role-play which exhibited this ambiguity, with children wildly oscillating between enactments of parenthood (that seemed to visit social questions of responsibility and familial care), and enactments of zombies, witches, and demonic possession (which seemed quite the opposite). Furthermore, the project provided evidence of the traffic between role-play in computer games and role-play on the playground. In one example, a group of primary school boys were playing games on the playground derived from the hugely-popular *Call of Duty* franchise, in particular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009). They enacted characters from the game, used lines of dialogue, brandished imaginary weapons, and recapitulated narrative sequences from the game. These observations raised several questions for us, some which have been explored earlier in this essay. What does it mean to play this kind of role? What is the relationship between the player's offline world and their game world? What kinds of social interaction are taking place? And, more specifically in this setting, what is the relation between role-play in the virtual world of the game, and role-play in the rather different virtual world of the playground?

In relation to this last question, we drew on Foucault's influential concept of the *heterotopia* (1984). Foucault argues that, while utopias are unreal and ideal spaces, heterotopias are real and liminal spaces, using examples such as ships, brothels, and cemeteries. In childhood, while the imaginary worlds of children's games (both video games and playground games) are clearly not real in the usual sense, they may be more real for the life-world of the child than the adult utopia, at least at times. There may be times when the imaginative power of zombies and SAS troopers has more of a density, color, and cultural salience than the rhetorics of development, co-operation, and citizenship which dominate the

utopian playground. And while some of Foucault's examples of transgressive, liminal spaces of ritual and taboo clearly cannot apply to children's play (brothels being the obvious example), others fit very well: ships (the children built ships of wooden planks), colonies (*Modern Warfare 2*), and cemeteries (zombie games).

Foucault uses a mirror as a metaphor for the relationship between the self and the spaces of heterotopias and utopia, representing split presence, self-projection from a real to a virtual space, a portal between the two, and an interstitial object between utopia and heterotopias. This captures something of the ambiguity and paradox of the virtual worlds and bodies in children's computer games and playground game play, and their uneasy relationship with the physical playgrounds, bodies, identities, and voices.

There is no space here to develop the theme of dramatic embodiment, both physical and real, though it was important in our project (see Willett *et al.*, 2013, for a fuller discussion; and Boellstorff, 2008, for a discussion of virtual embodiment in *Second Life*). However, I will briefly mention the importance of drama in the game-derived art form of machinima. While this is often conceived of as a media art form closely akin to animation, the dramatic performance of virtual bodies in 3-D worlds involves role-play of another kind, more closely-related to theatre and to the dramatic aspects of film (Burn, 2009).

Finally, the advent of game-authoring tools accessible to users makes it possible for them to design their own forms of role-play. My own work (*Playing Shakespeare*, Arts and Humanities Research Council's Digital Transformations program, 2012) involves young people's game design, most recently in the form of game adaptation of Shakespeare plays in collaboration with Shakespeare's Globe (2012). Here, 13-year-olds design the player-role of Macbeth, embarking on his mission to kill Duncan, spurred on by Lady Macbeth as an NPC (Figure 2). Here, the creative possibilities of role-play as a dramatic and ludic form are extended into the opportunities provided by design rather than play.



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from Macbeth game by two 13-year-old girls.

Player view as Macbeth outside Duncan's bedchamber.

### **Conclusion: The Ambiguity of (Role)Play**

It might be argued that it is in the playground that the impulse begins for the kinds of drama Boal and drama educators espouse. Here, away from adult supervision, children not only work out how to devise imaginary scenarios and roles, to enact and direct them, and to improvise with bodies, language, objects, and the built environment; but also how to connect these kinds of dramatic play with the dramas of the computer games they play. In any case, this example demonstrates what we might call, adapting Sutton-Smith, the “ambiguity of

role-play”: how it can be committed yet provisional, profound yet superficial, serious yet trivial, engaged yet critically distanced, and consequential yet inconsequential.

In his account of how people use dramaturgical strategies to perform selfhood in everyday life, Goffman cites Sartre’s legendary anecdote of the antics of a waiter in a café. He decides that the waiter is simply acting out his role; and he contrasts the relatively fixed roles of adults with the more fluid roles of children: “The game is a kind of marking out and investigation. The child plays with his body in order to explore it, to take inventory of it; the waiter in the café plays with his condition in order to *realize* it” (Sarte, [1943] 2003, p. 59). Clearly, the children in the playground are, as children do, using role-play and their bodies (including the virtual bodies of their game avatars) to explore, investigate, and play. It may be the case that role-play in video games, as in many other forms of adult play (fancy-dress, amateur dramatics, paintballing) legitimizes the continuation into adulthood of that fluidity and space to explore.

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